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# FOOD: A Human Rights Issue Ignored in Sociology

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*Notes From the Field*  
**FOOD: A Human Rights Issue Ignored in  
Sociology**

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**Abstract**

Mainstream sociology, including the sociology of health, has been remiss by ignoring food as an important human right both in the United States and globally. This article documents the neglect of food as a topic of sociological inquiry and argues for the centrality of a sociological lens in understanding food as a human right. Sociological ideas are important in understanding forces which have encouraged the globalization of food production and distribution, decreased the equality of access to nutritious food, and threatened core human rights. Sociologists as teachers and researchers need to become academic activists on this important human rights topic.

**Keywords**

Food, Human Rights, Agribusiness, Marginalized Groups

**SOCIOLOGY'S NEGLECT OF FOOD AS A HUMAN RIGHTS  
ISSUE**

The United Nations has clearly recognized the importance of food to human rights, articulating the right to adequate food as “indivisibly linked to the inherent dignity of the human person and indispensable for the fulfillment of other human rights enshrined in the International Bill of Human Rights” (CESCR General Comment 12). The UN made a particularly strong statement on the access to nutritious and culturally appropriate food when it established a Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food in April of 2000.

Sociology as a discipline could learn from the emphasis the United Nations has placed on food as a human right. With food being so central to human rights, and with food increasingly a topic in academic books and journals, one might expect sociological journals and textbooks to feature an ongoing discussion of the importance of food to social, political, and economic wellbeing and health. Yet, an

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examination of mainstream sociological outlets which reasonably would have food and health content shows the opposite: in the discipline's core journals there is almost no inclusion of research regarding food, much less the focused attention to food as a human right. Using "food" alone as a generous keyword in a search — generous in that it does not subset human rights — produces little in sociology of health journals. In the past six years, two key sociology of health journals, *Sociology of Health and Illness* and the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, have each had two articles on food. Little appears in ASA journals indexed in *Sociological Abstracts*. In the past six years Sociological Abstracts notes five articles. Sociology of Health text books largely ignore the topic. For instance in Weitz's excellent 2010 *Sociology of Health, Illness, and Health Care* one finds fewer than 10 pages on food; in Cockerham's 2012 *Medical Sociology* the index has no listing for food. Our sister discipline of geography does much better. Four top social geography journals (*Antipode*, *Cultural Geographies*, *Social and Cultural Geography*, and *Population, Space and Place*) have 11, 7, 6, and 4 articles respectively during the same six year time period using the same criterion. Geography's greater attention to food issues likely reflects the field's long-standing focus on the links between human society and the physical environment, including agriculture.

Food as a human rights issue would benefit from a sociological analysis given how the discipline could examine the issue in terms of political economy, power, and global relations. Such an analysis would lead to a better understanding of the causes of the decline in nutritious food and the unequal distribution of food within and between countries. It would help to shift discussions of global hunger from individual behaviors leading to overpopulation to conversations about institutions, inequality in distribution and access to food, and human rights. Further, our discipline reaches beyond typical political economy concerns because of its particular sensitivities to vulnerable groups, poverty, and cultural differences, all of which are important when examining food as a human right.

This article can only partially cover the topic of food as a human right, as the reach of relevant sociology is vast. However, we do hope to encourage others to explore some of the issues we raise, expound on certain others, and be activists in pushing the discipline to recognize that access to ample nutritious food is an important human

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right. In particular, it is a topic which could and should be easily included in a variety of sociology courses.

#### THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE HUMAN RIGHT TO FOOD

Bringing greater sociological attention to the human right to food is not different from the increasing human rights focus on other topics in sociology. As others have discussed (Sjoberg, Gill, and Williams 2001; and more recently Blau 2011), the sociological lens on human rights requires a concern with social claims made by individuals and the discovery (or rediscovery) of ethics in sociology. We not only need to understand general institutional and economic barriers in access to food but also to understand their impact on human dignity and security. A sterile, macro-sociological analysis is not enough. It needs to connect at the level of individuals.

As a human rights issue, food provides a critical example of the suffering of vulnerable groups. But quite importantly, access to and the affordability of nutritious food is a problem for *everyone* in *every* society, not just vulnerable groups and not just in poorer countries. So we will first examine the general case of the lack of nutritious food, doing so with a political economy lens to understand important aspects of the industrialization of food production, and then turn to the growing concentration of economic power in the food industry, the denial of access to nutritious food, and then, as we end this article, provide a brief comment on culture and food, and a beginning suggestion of sociological questions about food as a human right.

#### THE INDUSTRIALIZATION OF FOOD PRODUCTION

At the most basic level, a political economy lens sees a concentration of agribusinesses in the decrease in small-scale farming, as in family farms, typically involving diversified, decentralized acreage and grazing land. In its place is an increase in the average farm size, and the transformation of crop and animal farms into large commercial operations. The change in the character of farms has been so dramatic it has produced a new language to describe places where food is grown and animals are raised. We now talk about industrial monocultures, concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) and industrial food animal production (IFAP), and agribusinesses. For instance, the US had over 600,000 hog farms in the early 1980s; by

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2011 the number was down to 70,000. Hog farms with more than 50,000 head grew rapidly; those with fewer than 2,000 lost ground steadily (Meyer 2012). The efficiencies are striking, especially in animal raising where feeding and tending are accomplished more easily. Because of these efficiencies meat costs have dropped considerably from 1970 to 2005 and animals have grown bigger and faster. In 1950 it took 84 days for a chicken to grow to five pounds; in 2005 it only took 45 days (PEW Commission 2008:5).

This industrialization of food not only does not solve the problem of access to healthy food because the global food problem has not been one of needing greater productivity — we have enough food in the world, it just is not distributed rationally (Nestle 2002), but also it generates other problems. Notable is the failure to be sustainable, a key point in UN documents: food “must be accessible for both present and future generations” (CESCR General Comment 12). Sustainability is threatened with modern industrialized agriculture for many reasons. Industrialized methods often use more herbicides and pesticides (Roundup Ready seeds are thusly named because, after all, they are specifically designed for use with a Monsanto herbicide), and the methods use antibiotics on animals as disease *prevention*. The antibiotics are needed because of the close quarters forced on the animals, but their use raises the risk of antimicrobial resistance — especially troubling because food has become a major source of such resistance (Pew Commission 2008). Such operations also contaminate ground water in part because of the huge concentration of manure in a limited area. These negative impacts all suggest a lack of sustainability.

The push for more productivity has literally been a gold mine for corporations with inventive ways to grow more crops and to raise more animals and to do so more quickly, more profitably, and more predictably. Illustrative of these ways would be the actions of Monsanto, which has aggressively moved into the seed market by buying major seed companies (Center for Food Safety 2004), and then developed and patented genetically modified (GM) crops. Monsanto has intimidated farmers into buying their seeds new each year by spying on them and threatening to sue them if they tried to save the seeds from one year to the next (Barlett and Steele 2008). These legal actions have been very successful. Monsanto won 91 of the 104

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lawsuits between them and farmers in the criminal justice system up to 2007 (Center for Food Safety 2007). In another show of force, Monsanto attacked scientists raising the issue of possible dangers in agricultural biotechnology. A public relations firm with ties to Monsanto “created false Internet identities and spread rumors” that attacked these scientists and thus greatly diminished their ability to raise questions (Worthy, Strohman, Billings, and the Berkeley Biotechnology Working Group 2005). In addition, Monsanto became yet another example of the business-regulatory revolving door with the increased power that such access conveys on a company. In 2009, Monsanto’s VP for Public Policy was appointed to an advisory post for the FDA Commissioner.

CAFOs and industrialized monocultures were developed in the US, and then have been introduced elsewhere (Pew Commission 2008). Such exporting of a model is not new. During the 1960s, the “Green Revolution” laid the foundation for industrialized agriculture, though at that time the political motivation of Western governments was to feed people and prevent the spread of communism (Clapp 2012). The current motivation is more strictly economic (and especially noteworthy in that the exporter / benefactor is not governments so much as private corporations devoted to their own profit making), but no less powerful as viewed by the receiving countries because the transnational corporations are so large. The effects are seen as devastating. In India, a social activist physicist, Vandana Shiva, argues that the introduction of GMOs threatens native grains, impoverishes farmers who can no longer save their seeds from year to year, and threatens the environment (Shiva 2005).

It is not only the production of food which has become global, but we now have “long-distance corporate-created supply chains” (Germov and Williams 2008:31). Again, such chains have historical antecedents from centuries before with such groups as the English East India Company, but the entry of more powerful transnational corporations has transformed relationships. Cargill, the largest privately owned company in the world, sources and trades a wide range of food commodities “from wheat to soy to cocoa to meat” (Clapp 2012:101). It controls nearly half of the world’s grain trade. In this food chain a hungry nation may literally be forced to produce items they would not usually grow and then export them —

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sometimes planting non-food items (e.g. tobacco or flowers) where food used to grow— or to raise and export food which has been an important part of their traditional healthy diet. A good example is the sudden popularity of quinoa in globalized markets. In short order, what was a cheap and nutritious part of the Ecuadorean diet was lost to middle class tables in the US and Europe (Romero and Shahiari 2011).

#### THE GROWING CONCENTRATION OF POWER IN THE PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION OF FOOD

Increasing concentration and increasing profitability of the food industry has led to powerful actors. The evidence of the strength of the Food Industry is remarkable. In addition to Monsanto wielding its power in many ways, other Big Food players have pushed their agendas by altering food advice given by the federal government. During revisions of the food pyramid, the National Cattlemen's Association grew concerned about "eat less red meat" advice. They successfully forced a change in wording to "choose lean" and "have two or three servings a day" (Nestle 1993). Similar battles have been won by the Sugar Association (Brownell and Warner 2009).

We now have "massive agribusiness companies" (Brownell and Warner 2009:263) from growers and butchering plants, to food sellers and restaurants. Big players in the food retailer part of the chain include Kraft, General Mills, PepsiCo and ConAgra, with each owning ten or more brands (Brownell and Horgen 2004). These big players have vast financial resources to advertise what is largely unhealthy food. Says Marion Nestle, a noted nutritionist: "[T]here's \$34 billion worth of advertising . . . that goes to . . . foods that are high in fat and calories, mostly from corn sweeteners and hydrogenated fats" (Nestle 2003:1).

Much of the advertising is directed at kids (Story and French 2004) who face a tsunami of advertising that encourages them to select unhealthy food and develop brand loyalty in the process. Companies have been powerful enough to force their way into the school cafeteria. Companies like Coca Cola bribed their way in by offering huge contracts to schools for exclusive rights to sell their "liquid candy" product. One Colorado school signed an \$8 million 10-year agreement. The principal, who signed memos "The Coke Dude,"

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told teachers to allow students to drink Coke during class because increasing school consumption increased revenues (Nestle 2002). Such practices were reduced somewhat in 2006 when the Alliance for a Healthier Generation worked with the Clinton Foundation and the American Heart Association to establish restrictions on sugary drinks in elementary schools, as well as some portion reduction in drink size.

#### DENYING ACCESS TO NUTRITIOUS FOOD

These policies and programs contribute to a general assault on human rights by denying *all* people access to nutritious food grown in a sustainable way. They also illustrate the particularly devastating effect our food system has on more *vulnerable* people, particularly people in poverty and marginalized groups. Through farm legislation, the federal government has essentially subsidized highly processed foods. For example, government funding supports corn as an agricultural crop and thus various products that include corn (e. g., corn syrup and processed foods) are relatively inexpensive, but not very healthy. In contrast, more nutritious foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, get no such subsidy (Mortazavi 2011). The price of fresh fruits and vegetables has increased by a factor of 3.3 since 1985 while the consumer price index has only increased by 2.1 (Brownell and Frieden 2009). These price differentials affect us all, but poverty becomes a huge limiting factor in being able to eat in a healthy way.

Poor people also find access to healthy food difficult because they often live in neighborhoods with a dearth of good, healthy food. Sometimes characterized as “food deserts,” such areas have more small grocery stores, convenience stores, liquor stores, and fast food establishments, and fewer well-stocked large and chain supermarkets than more affluent neighborhoods do (Powell et al. 2007; Moore and Diez-Roux 2006). Access to fresh produce and healthy choices is thus limited and a serious grocery gap results, based on one’s neighborhood. Although there may be options in nearby neighborhoods, poor people are often confined to local stores by lack of time and available transportation.

Although less affluent areas sometimes have access to farmers’ markets or other sorts of local, direct-sale vendors, these do not necessarily present an adequate remedy to food deserts. At a recent panel on sustainable cuisine, author Terry Walters shared her



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observations of an urban farm located in a low-income inner-city in Connecticut, describing how seemingly poor people walked past the farm stand even though there was no grocery store in walking distance (Walters 2012). One explanation might be that this urban farm has been “coded white”—understood to be a space inhabited by middle class white people, and thus exclusionary to low-income people of color (Guthman 2008). Another, related explanation is affordability; farmers’ markets are not necessarily cheaper and often carry value-added goods that appeal to particular middle-class tastes. At this Connecticut urban farm, products are significantly higher in price than in the grocery store. For example, three oranges and a bunch of kale cost ten dollars. Thus, simple “access” to healthy food is an incomplete solution.

Poor children have access to food in school lunches, but their right to healthy food has not been well-protected. For instance, Department of Agriculture sponsored school lunches are often less healthy than they should be. This is because the programs serve not only the dietary needs of the students but also the needs of the Department of Agriculture as it supports farmers with surplus commodities. Decisions about foods to include at lunch take these surpluses into account. Therefore, it is likely that the foods included in these meal programs are not necessarily those that are the healthiest foods but rather those that are cheapest and available, even if these only marginally comply with nutrition standards (recall the push to define ketchup and pickle relish as vegetables, for example). In addition there are political pressures from the food industry. When nutrition-minded people wanted less beef served at school lunches, the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association was not happy and made their objections clear. Fast food chains were allowed into the school lunchroom in the mid-1990s so young children were exposed to Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, Subway, McDonald’s, and other fast food establishments. Although the fast food served in the school had to have higher nutritional value than a similar offering at the same fast food restaurant in the neighborhood, the food was still less healthy than desirable. Serving fast food also generates brand loyalty which potentially leads to life-long preferences for less healthy food (Levine 2008).

In addition to people in poverty, vulnerable people who

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might have their right to adequate food denied or compromised include members of many other groups. The UN refers to the prohibition of discrimination in access to food based on “race, colour, sex, language, age, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status” (CESCR General Comment 12). Here we focus on ethnic groups residing away from their country of origin.

As described above, issues of access to food center on access to healthy, nutritious food. However, few question what actually constitutes healthy food—in the US, there is a general, vague understanding that it consists of fresh fruits and vegetables, hearty grains, minimally processed foods, and so forth. What that looks like to long-time American residents—raspberries, beef tenderloin, celery — may be different for someone from another cultural and geographic milieu. Rambutan, beef tripe, and taro might be necessities. As various migrant groups increasingly build their lives in the US, the society must contend with the cultural diversity and demands that come along with it. As Shiva asserts, “Food security is not just having access to adequate food. It is also having access to culturally appropriate food” (Shiva 2000:21).

#### A CULTURAL LENS

Thus, the question of food access expands beyond that of health and nutrition to the cultural realm. With food playing a major role in the lives of many groups, is everyone equally able to participate in the cultural life of the community (UDHR Article 27.1)? For nearly a century, the Makah people of the Pacific Northwest were prevented from engaging in the cultural and religious practice of whaling due to conflicts with American conservationist culture (Miller 2000/2001). Denial of cultural self-determination aside, the restriction of access to their traditional diet and introduction of store-bought meat and other “Western” foods has contributed to negative health consequences such as the pervasiveness of diabetes among the Makah and other indigenous groups.

Other culturally marginalized groups such as immigrants mirror this shifting pattern of consumption. For instance, among Chinese Americans, longer periods of residence in the US is associated with decreased consumption of traditional Chinese foods and

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increased consumption of fats and sweets (Lv and Cason 2004). Similarly, diets of Vietnamese immigrants become higher in fat, cholesterol, and sodium as they consume more processed and convenience foods over grains, fruits, and vegetables (Ikeda, Pham, Nguyen, and Mitchell. 2002). These shifts are due, in part, to the limited availability of traditional sources of nutrition. Although large grocery stores are increasingly carrying culturally relevant products due to increasing mainstream demand, these products are often found in the interiors of the grocery store (as opposed to the “fresh periphery”) as bottled sauces and condiments, certain dry goods, spices, and premade meals. The abundance of these sorts of processed foods may prove more appealing, affordable, and convenient, especially if fresh counterparts are not readily available.

#### EMPIRICAL ISSUES IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF FOOD AS A HUMAN RIGHT

For sociology to honor its commitment to a human rights agenda, the challenge is to develop both active research agendas and policy analysis. The paucity of work is not due to a lack of issues for sociologists to pursue. Questions worthy of scholarly work are many and varied. Examples could include:

1. Among low-income people in the US, how does food availability (e.g., a large chain grocery store with quality fruits and vegetables) affect the food people actually buy?
2. What increases or decreases the chances that a community farmers' market reaches low-income consumers?
3. In poor countries, what is the impact of international food aid on farmers, local markets, and the availability of quality local food?
4. In poor countries, what are the strategies that small farmers have for coping with food related technologies, including GM seeds, chemicals, and fertilizers? What food-related technologies have negative impacts on small farmers and how can these impacts be reduced?

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5. What are the differing impacts of "free trade" and "fair trade" on farmers and communities in poor countries?
6. How do local and national power structures in poor countries affect food markets (both for export and local consumption) and food marketing?
7. How have grassroots efforts in the US and elsewhere helped to realize the human right to food?
8. How do various people active around food (e.g., anti-CAFO activists, farmers' market organizers, anti-GMO organizations, food banks and soup kitchens) conceptualize the work they do? Do they use the language of human rights? Does it matter?
9. What is the relationship between efforts of grassroots organizing, NGOs, and international organizations such as the UN?
10. In the arena of food, what is the role of positivistic science in both achieving *and* impeding the realization of the human right to food, especially among those in "developing" nations?

Sociological work that investigates these questions and others that address the rights to food can contribute to understanding the relationship between global political economy and human rights, as well as drawing connections to individual lives. Though embedded in complex sets of social relations and institutions, people's relationships with food are also highly personal. Sociology of food as a human right would draw out these connections and complement efforts to achieve social justice.

## CONCLUSION

Food is core to human rights. It is an issue that activist, human rights sociologists should not ignore. Though human rights to food are under constant assault, people struggle everyday to realize these rights for themselves and others. Worldwide, the Via Campesina movement links peasants, farmers, and eaters as they work

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towards achieving food sovereignty, “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally-appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” (Via Campesina 2009). These struggles manifest differently according to the context and specific needs of the community. For instance, in New York, the Hattie Carthan Community Garden in Brooklyn addresses both the need for fresh food as well as sharing and reclaiming of immigrant food traditions (Schiavoni 2009). In Milwaukee, a MacArthur Foundation Genius awardee, Will Allen, has built an urban farm growing food that is affordable and accessible to poor people. Across several states, people are pressuring their legislatures to mandate GMO labeling of foods and ingredients. And around the world, farmers save seeds privately and in seed banks in an effort to protect biodiversity and resist the control of multinational corporations (Shiva 2000).

Community-based activism around food has clearly been extensive and has had an impact on the quality and availability of food. Further successful mobilization in the field would benefit from published sociological research with its potential wide audience of professionals, activists, and students who could then better understand, and become more concerned about, food as a human right. We have documented our discipline’s relative silence on this topic and brought together multi-disciplinary, but primarily not sociological, research to discuss several food topics of core potential concern to sociology. In doing so, we hope we have encouraged human rights sociologists to do more research on and discussion about issues raised in this paper, as well as others.

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*World* and written articles on Globalization, Women, and Health; Midwifery; Health and Human Rights; and Poverty and Health.

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